DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 436 263 PS 028 099

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TITLE Intergenerational Interactions.
PUB DATE 1999-11-11
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (New Orleans, LA, November 10-13, 1999).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Age Groups; Community Programs; Early Childhood Education; Gerontology; *Intergenerational Programs; Mixed Age Grouping; *Older Adults; *Young Children
IDENTIFIERS Adult Child Relationship; *Barriers to Implementation; *Intergenerational Relationship

ABSTRACT

The need for intergenerational programming, involving the purposeful bringing together of different generations in ongoing mutually beneficial planned activities designed to achieve specified program goals, is growing in the United States. This paper discusses issues involved in early educational and intergenerational care, focusing on potential barriers in the academic and human service aspects of intergenerational programs and the potential benefits of these programs. Potential barriers discussed include: the distinct practices and terminology in the field of early childhood education and gerontology and the need to provide cross-training; children's use of inappropriate language with older adults; and discomfort for participating adults or children in various types of environments. The paper also maintains that senior adults and young children are on parallel developmental courses and have parallel needs. The paper recommends the use of activities that are therapeutic by design, such as looking at photographs to allow for memory recall for adults. Benefits of intergenerational programs for children, older adults, and the community are also examined. The paper concludes by noting that communities often lack opportunities for intergenerational contact and that intergenerational programs provide opportunities to benefit from the richness of an age-integrated society. (KB)

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INTERGENERATIONAL INTERACTIONS

PAPER PRESENTED
BY

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&
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AT THE
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE EDUCATION OF YOUNG CHILDREN
1999 ANNUAL CONFERENCE
NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA
NOVEMBER 11, 1999

PS 028099

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National Association for the Education of Young Children
1999 Annual Conference
November 10-13, 1999 new Orleans, Louisiana

Intergenerational Interactions

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Rational

Demographics indicate the demand for child and senior adult care is rapidly increasing. More and more children require daily supervision while their parents work, and more adults are living to advanced ages, therefore both are in need of care. The need for quality day care workers is also dramatically increasing, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics currently reports a decline of day care workers as a result of 50-54% annual turnover and fewer qualified workers entering the field. A need also exists for professionals to care for senior adults who are the fastest growing segment of our population (Taxel, 1993). The quality of life for both age groups can be enhanced through interrelated and stimulating intergenerational activities.

Research indicates that providing intergenerational care has positive benefits for senior adults and children. Both experience enhanced self-esteem and self-worth. There are basic human needs that are acknowledged to be essential components of well-being. They include the need to be intellectually stimulated, to feel purposeful, maintain meaningful relationships, and feel worthwhile and affirmed. We have found that these needs are met by intergenerational programs (Newman, 1980). Through interaction, both have increased opportunities for companionship and for the development of meaningful relationships. Clark, Allison, and Gilbert (ECN,1990), found that intergenerational programming "enables the seniors and children to help and be helped, teach and be taught, love and be loved," creating a win/win/win/win situation.

Definition and History

Intergenerational programming is defined as the purposeful bringing together of different generations in on-going mutually beneficial planned activities designed to achieve specified program goals (Generations United). Intergenerational programming is far from a new concept in

the United States, but is a concept who's time has come. The beginnings of such programming can be traced back to the early 1960's in the United States. By the late 60's and early 70's programs such as RSVP and the Gray Panthers were well know throughout the country.

As the need for such programs grew, agencies began to combine efforts. In 1980 the National Council on Aging and the Child Welfare League of America joined forces to create Generations United. Since this time the movement has continued to grow and most recently has joined forces with overseas partners to create the first International Intergenerational Coalition.

The focus and variety of, intergenerational programs is extremely broad in this country. The focus of this paper is education and intergenerational care. Because this field is relatively new in the educational arena, there have been numerous barriers to overcome in both the academic and human service aspects of intergenerational programs.

What are the Potential Barriers?

Not only does intergenerational studies marry academics and human services, but it has also combined two disciplines, early childhood education and gerontology, which each have distinct practices and terminology. When venturing into an intergenerational program of this kind it is important to provide appropriate cross-training to staff members from both disciplines, to avoid communication breakdowns. The success of intergenerational partnership programs depends on the amount of planning and preparation that goes into the developmental stage (AARP, 1996). The use of terminology within a discipline can easily be mistranslated to someone from another discipline, causing a wall to be constructed between the two camps and making it virtually impossible for the program to succeed.

For activities personnel in longterm care settings, entertainment is a term used to describe a meaningful exchange between a child and senior adult. However, upon hearing the term entertainment, an early childhood teacher immediately conjures up images of children performing for adults allowing for no bonding time. An early childhood professional might prefer the term interaction versus entertainment, yet both professions are suggesting the same type of engagement. Other possible terms include experience vs. activity, planned vs. structure, friend vs. visitor, all having shared meaning, but without prior cross-training and discussion the syntax of the terms create immense barriers between the two professional teams.

In a time where political correctness is a way of life in America, it is also plays a key role in the success of intergenerational programs. It is just as important to be appropriate with senior adults as it is the young children. A senior adult may need to employ the use of special undergarments, similar to that of a young child, but a senior adult does not wear a diaper. Even the

use of a too commonly used slang term such as "old timers" is extremely offensive and instills beliefs in the young minds of the children. It is important to use proper terminology when referring to medical, emotional, and social conditions, especially when explaining such conditions to a young child.

Environments can also become major barriers when developing an intergenerational program. Many senior adults feel uncomfortable in school type settings and may refrain from visiting the children's classroom if it resembles a children's furniture warehouse. Observation and informal research surveys indicate that interactions between the children and senior adults are far more successful in a home-like environment. In order to create an appropriate intergenerational learning environment couches, chairs, Afghans, rugs, and other familiar items should be incorporated into the setting. The children should still have all of the traditional learning centers to choose from however, items can be stored in bureaus, baskets, or steamer trunks that can be easily accessed by the youngsters, rather than on primary colored shelves or office-like cabinets. We refer to this as the "Family Room" Approach to the intergenerational learning environment. A home-like environment where there are quiet spaces, high energy spaces, and a wide variety of activities geared to different ages offered in a relaxed atmosphere. This new intergenerational learning environment has a very satisfying effect on both the children and senior adults. A home-like setting seems to be the best setting in which to cultivate meaningful intergenerational experiences.

Intergenerational Programming

Parallel Development and Needs:

Through observational research we discovered that senior adults and young children are on parallel developmental courses. The developmental domains include emotional, social, physical, and cognitive for both age groups. The children are developing and progressing through the domains as the senior adults are often digressing and regressing through the domains.

As people age they are faced with the realities of fading health and their own mortality. Their emotional state begins to take its toll, often times, causing them to withdraw from social interactions. Due to the lack of physical activity, their physical health begins to suffer and the overall lack of interaction leads to cognitive dissolution. The developmental digression does not necessarily occur in that order, just as children do not progress in the same manner through the developmental domains.

The children and senior adults also have parallel needs. These two age groups need the basic food, shelter, and "TLC", as well as continuing educational opportunities. These programs

help to alleviate the boredom and symptoms of loneliness often associated with aging, and allow children to experience diversity and culture through experienced eyes. Programs that combine children and senior adults with a wide range of experiences, interests and abilities offer a broader perspective of lifespan development and diversity.

As intergenerational professionals it is very important to remember to implement DAP philosophies, but for intergenerational purposes DAP has dual meaning. Developmentally Appropriate Practice is easily lifespan adaptable, but DAP in intergenerational terms translates as "Definitely Act Positive." Staff morale needs to stay consistently high, so often times in order to be enthusiastic they have to act enthusiastic. In a sometimes chaotic and confusing environment, staff must find the paradox-a calming atmosphere. Trained staff who recognize the inherent value of intergenerational relationships and are committed to promoting connections, somehow find a way to "definitely act positive."

Activities that are Therapeutic By Design:

Although therapy is not widely used in traditional early childhood care facilities, it is a necessity in intergenerational care facilities. However, activities utilized traditionally by early childhood professionals can be very therapeutic for the senior adults. An experience like bubble blowing is actually an aerobic activity for seniors. Activities Coordinators can encourage the senior adults to take deep breathes and to concentrate on their breathing while blowing bubbles with the children. Looking at pictures in a photo album allow for memory recall and the opportunity for the seniors to share memories with the children. Very simple experiences can become therapeutic without becoming an imposition on the senior adults, the children, or the intergenerational experience. Again activities of daily living are enhanced if the environment is appropriately established as an intergenerational setting. The "Family Room" approach to interaction becomes the emphasis.

What are the Benefits?

The benefits of these types of intergenerational program are far reaching and include benefits to not only the children and senior adults but to the middle generations. The middle generations in this case, are the facilitators, the participants' families, any staff members involved, and the community in which the program is housed.

Children are provided the opportunity to experience realistic and accurate perceptions of aging, develop positive relationships with senior adults, increase their self-esteem and feelings of self-worth, and receive extra attention, encouragement and nurturing they might not otherwise receive in this highly mobile society.

Senior adults are able to share their time, talents, culture and values, enhance their self-esteem and feelings of self-worth, develop new and positive relationships, and learn new skills and and continue to strive for personal growth.

The community immediately benefits from the care and educational aspect, but the true rewards will come down the road as these children grow and become more respectful and caring citizens within the community.

Conclusion

Our communities are missing intergenerational contact. Children spend their day with other children of the same age. Adults work with others who are for the most part in the same age group. Older adults often live and/or socialize in communities or facilities that include only members of their own generation. We tend to segregate our communities by age, which allows each generation to see itself as a separate entity rather than an integral part of a larger community (AARP, 1996).

Intergenerational programs provide opportunities for individuals, families, and communities to once again enjoy and benefit from the richness of an age-integrated society. They reach beyond the needs and interests of individuals involved and enrich society as a whole (Generations United).

Dr. William Thomas describes the intergenerational approach as a "cure." "It's a holistic approach to care, a creation of a "human habitat" where people thrive, grow, and flourish, rather than wither, decay, and die" (Clark, 1995).

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